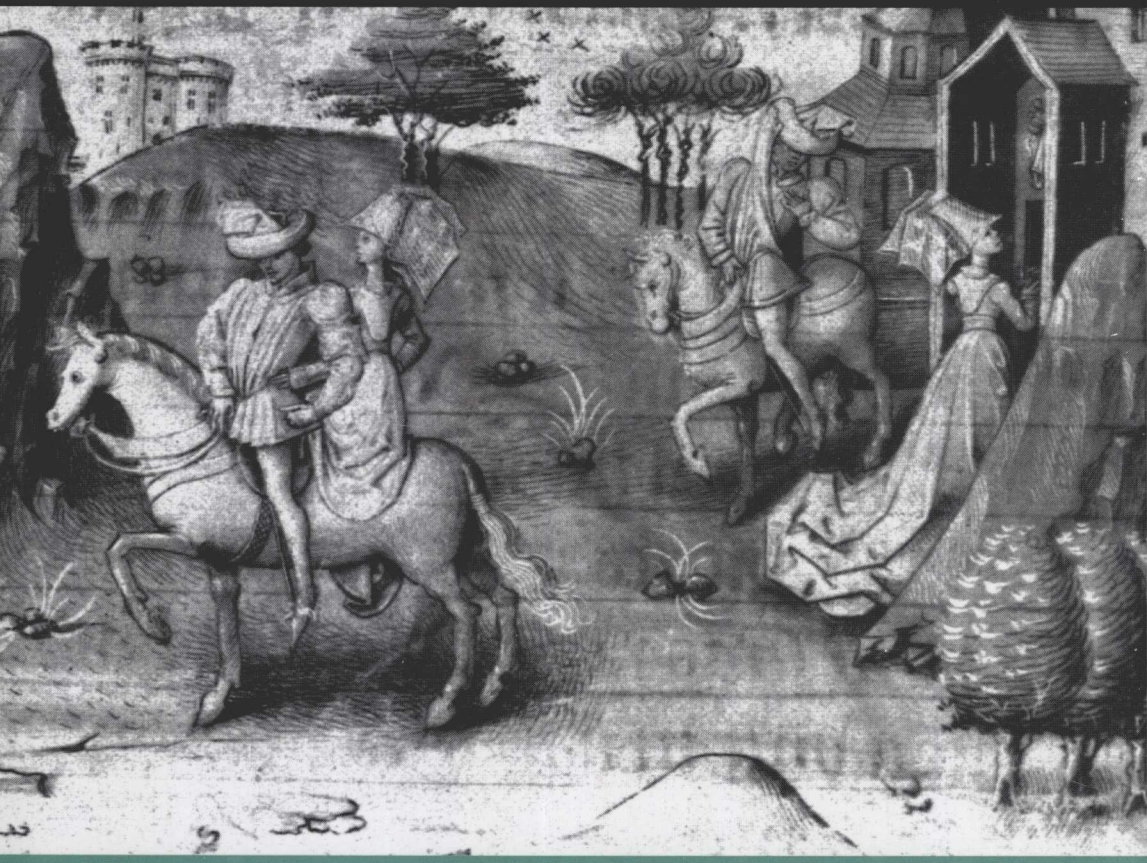
Love and Conflict in **Medieval Drama**

The Plays and their Legacy



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The important role played by French drama in the evolution of the European theatre in the period between 1450 and 1550 is emphasised

by the sheer volume of material composed and performed. Many of the texts used here have been made available by one scholar and I want to acknowledge our debt to him by dedicating this book to my good friend and colleague, Chevalier des Arts et Sciences, Graham Runnalls.

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Abbreviations and short titles used in the text and notes

AASS: *Acta sanctorum*: Collegit Joannes Bollandus *et al.* 61 vols. Brussels, 1965–70.

Abruzzese: V. De Bartholomaeis. *Il teatro abruzzese del medio evo*. Bologna, 1924.

Best, *Bidermann*: Thomas W. Best. *Jacob Bidermann*. New York, 1975.

Black: Nancy B. Black. *Medieval narratives of accused queens*. Gainesville, Fla., 2003.

Boysse: E. Boysse. *Le théâtre des Jésuites*. Slatkine repr. Geneva, 1970.

BSS: *The book of saints. A dictionary of servants of God canonised by the Catholic Church*. Compiled by the Benedictine monks of St Augustine's Abbey Ramsgate. Sixth edition, London, 1989.

Bullough: Geoffrey, Bullough. *Narrative and dramatic sources of Shakespeare*. 8 vols. London, 1957–75.

Cangé: (Cangé MS) *Miracles de Notre Dame par personnages*. Ed. G. Paris and U. Robert. SATF. 8 vols. Paris, 1876–93.

CFMA: Classiques Français du Moyen Age.

Cohen, *Mons*: Gustave Cohen. *Le livre de conduite du régisseur . . . pour le mystère de la passion à Mons en 1501*. Paris, 1925.

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De Bruyn: Lucy. De Bruyn. *Woman and the Devil in sixteenth-century literature*. Tisbury, 1979.

EDAM: Early Drama, Art and Music.

Edelman: Nathan. Edelman. *Attitudes of seventeenth-century France towards the Middle Ages*. New York, 1936.

EMD: *European Medieval Drama*.

Florentine drama: *Florentine drama for convent and festival.* Ed. and trans. J. W. and B. C. Cook. Chicago, 1996.

Harbage: Alfred Harbage. *Annals of English drama, 975–1700.* London, 1964.

Henrard: Nadine Henrard. *Le théâtre religieux médiéval en langue d'oc.* Geneva, 1998.

HLF: *Histoire littéraire de la France.*

Hüsken, *Everaert*: W. M. N. Hüsken. *De spelen van Cornelis Everaert.* 2 vols. Hilversum, 2005.

IMR: International Medieval Research.

Lancashire: Ian Lancashire. *Dramatic texts and records of Britain: a chronological topography to 1558.* Cambridge, 1984.

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Newbigin: N. Newbigin. *Feste d'Oltrarno. Plays in churches in fifteenth-century Florence.* 2 vols. Florence, 1996.

PMLA: *Publications of the Modern Language Association.*

Repertorium: M. M. Hummelen. *Repertorium van het Rederijkersdrama, 1500–c. 1620.* Assen, 1968.

Répertoire: L. Petit de Julleville. *Répertoire du théâtre comique en France au moyen âge*. Repr., Geneva, 1967.

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Sachs: Hans Sachs. *Werken*. Ed. A. V. Keller and E. Goetzer. Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins, Stuttgart, CIV–CXXIV. Stuttgart, 1866–92.

SATF: Société des Anciens Textes Français.

Spel en Spektakel: *Spel en Spektakel: middleeuws toneel in de Lage Landen*, ed. H. van Dijk and Bart Ramakers. Amsterdam, 2001.

Stegmann: A. Stegmann. *L'héroisme Cornélien*, II: *L'Europe intellectuel et le théâtre, 1580–1650*. Paris, 1968.

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TIE: Theatre in Europe. A Documentary History.

TIE *Medieval*: *The medieval European stage, 500–1550*. Ed. W. Tydeman. Cambridge, 2001.

TIE *German*: *The German and Dutch theatre, 1600–1848*. Ed. G. Brandt. Cambridge, 1993.

TLF: Textes Littéraires Français

Ukena: E. Ukena. *Die deutschen Mirakelspiele des Spätmittelalters. Studien und Texte*. 2 vols. Bern, 1975.

Valentin: Jean-Marie Valentin. *Le théâtre des Jésuites dans les pays de langue allemande (1554–1680)*. 3 vols. Bern, 1978.

Viel Testament: *Le mystère du Viel Testament*. Ed. J. de Rothschild. 6 vols. SATF. Paris, 1878.

V & A: Victoria and Albert Museum.

Weaver: E. B. Weaver. *Convent theatre in early modern Italy. Spiritual fun and learning for women*. Cambridge, 2001.

Worp: J. A. Worp. *Geschiedenis van het Drama en van het Toneel in Nederland*. 2 vols. Rotterdam, 1903.

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Introduction: staging the stories

FROM SACRED DRAMA TO SECULAR PLAY

The plays discussed in this companion volume to *The biblical drama of medieval Europe* are based on many kinds of serious stories from medieval sources: saints' lives and miracles, romances, epics and historical events from the siege of Troy to the Hundred Years War. The only biblical plays included are a few from Lille on the victories of Joshua, not previously available.[1] Polemical and morality plays are limited to examples relevant to the stories being discussed, and I have excluded (with a few exceptions) plays of situation rather than story, especially farces and Shrovetide plays.

What then is left after these omissions? The answer is a very substantial body of serious medieval plays on love and war, especially in French and Italian, with smaller but still significant collections in Spanish, German, English and Dutch. The varying amounts of medieval drama surviving from different countries has been vividly described by Peter Meredith: 'Where French language drama has hundreds of thousands of lines of texts (much still unedited) . . . England has a handful, an armful, perhaps a scaffold load.'[2] An imbalance in the number of references to the different language groups when discussing the stories is therefore inevitable but no attempt has been made to measure the relative quality of the plays – that is a task for the reader.

In a recently published article, Graham Runnalls, the acknowledged expert on medieval French play texts, has made it quite clear that to suggest that French medieval drama stops around 1500 is 'frankly absurd'.[3] Runnalls is referring here not only to religious drama, both biblical and hagiographic, but to the whole range of plays from miracles to farces. I have therefore taken the year 1550 as the end of half a millennium of medieval plays, and the beginning of the first century or so of retellings

of these stories on both amateur and professional stages, which I have called the 'legacy'.[4]

SUBJECT MATTER AND THE PLAYS

In *Aspects of genre*, a study of the characteristics of late medieval French drama, Alan Knight distinguished between the serious plays which were historical and therefore based on true stories, and the comedies and farces which were fiction.[5] Among the serious group he lists the Bible, saints' lives and profane history such as the fall of Troy. Plays are also based on the narrative epics and romances. The plays discussed in this volume cover a wide range of subjects and forms but all belong to this 'serious' drama. They also include a genre principally found in earlier centuries: the miracle play, whose stories must also by definition be history, though as will appear they do not necessarily fit into any of Knight's categories. In contrast to the biblical drama whose source is indisputable, these plays have a variety of backgrounds, both religious and secular, but they have one thing in common: they are never original, which helps to account for the large number of plays on the same or similar subjects.[6] It is the minor variations in these stories over the centuries that reflect the changes in the theatrical world of different parts of Europe at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period.

For convenience, the plays have been divided into four groups, according to subject matter. The divisions are based on the important collection of forty miracle plays found in the fourteenth-century Cangé MS, composed for performance at the annual meeting and dinner of a Parisian confraternity dedicated to the Virgin Mary, one each year from 1349 to 1382 (excluding 1354 and 1358–60 – years when Paris was under siege).[7] In an article for the *Histoire littéraire de la France* (XXXIX), the eminent French scholar, Alfred Jeanroy, pointed out that although all the plays are introduced as a 'miracle de Notre Dame' and contain an obligatory scene in which the Virgin Mary is honoured by the heavenly host singing specially composed *rondeaux*, more than half the plays are based on stories that have no connection with the Virgin. Jeanroy therefore divided the plays into four divisions: 'Légendes mariales' (seventeen plays); 'Légendes de saints' (eight plays); 'Légendes romanesques et héroiques' (eleven plays) and 'Légendes historiques romancées' (four plays).

The first group are straightforward dramatisations of well-known Marian miracles.[8] But the Virgin Mary has no real connection with the saints' lives in group two, or with most of the historical events in group four,

while many of the plays in group three are based on well-known stories from romances, such as the falsely accused queen, which were told and retold all over Europe in both religious and secular forms.[9] These Cangé groups do not, of course, include all the subjects treated in the book, many of which were added in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, including the theatre of cruelty inspired by the classical plays of Seneca but also reflecting the violence of the Passion and martyrdom scenes in the medieval plays.

WHO STAGED THE MEDIEVAL STORIES?

Saints' plays, like biblical subjects, were usually staged by religious communities or civic groups, but were rare in the celebrations of Corpus Christi, except as part of a procession.[10] There were a few examples of more personal arrangements. For example, in Metz in 1468, a play of the newly canonised St Catherine of Siena was commissioned by one Catherine de Baudoiche. The role of the saint was taken with great success by a girl of eighteen.[11] Stories on secular subjects, or presented in the form of miracle plays, might also be organised by trade guilds or religious confraternities, literary guilds or *Puys* (the title probably developed from the fact that the earliest such group was founded at Notre Dame du Puy in Valenciennes (Hainault). These *Puys* were most frequently found in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in northern France and the Low Countries. There was also a *Puy de London* modelled on the continental ones.[12]

Some of them were dedicated to poetry and music rather than drama, but others continued staging plays through to the sixteenth century. A morality, 'De la dame à l'Agneau et de la dame à l'Aspic' was presented as part of the ceremony at the meeting of the *Puy de la conception de la vierge* (also called the *Puy de palinods*) in Rouen in 1520. The play has an interesting double form: the conflict between the *Dame à l'agneau* (lamb) and the *Dame à l'aspic* (serpent) is not merely a struggle between the Virgin Mary and the Devil, it is also a clash between Rouen, whose crest was a Lady with a Lamb, and the Viper, the crest of Milan against whom Francis I had just declared war. I am grateful to Alan Hindley for finding me a copy of this interesting play. Further details of the *Puys* and an interesting account of the confraternity of the 'guilde des Archers' of Antwerp in 1493 is provided by Nigel Wilkins in an article based on a picture of the *Schuttersfeest* or 'fête de la guilde des archers du maître de Francfort (1493) et la musique des confréries'.[13]

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